



Fellowship
of the
Rockies

2017
*Christmas
Devotional*

Love's pure light!
Jena Cooper

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."
Matthew 5:14-16 NIV

Christmas time is an extremely hectic time in our household. Not only are we preparing for the holidays... my family of 7 has 5 birthdays in the months of December and January. Even with all this craziness it is by far my favorite time of the year. When I was growing up I looked forward to Christmas Eve service. I could not wait to light the candles and see that dark room light up. I still find myself looking forward to this, except now it has a different meaning and a different beauty. What is better than celebrating the birth of Jesus in fellowship with church family lighting up the room with Jesus's beautiful light?

When Jesus spoke again to the people, He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12 NIV

When the lights go dim and the candles start making their way around the room it's the most beautiful thing to me. It calms me and in that time I'm completely in awe celebrating the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This Christmas, through the hectic, stressful times and during the wonderful, glorious times, focus on what Jesus wants us to do... let His beautiful light shine through our attitudes, words and deeds. "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." 2 Corinthians 4:6

Planning for Christmas

Rob Johnston

Christmas is my favorite time of year. We decorate our homes, listen to Christmas music, exchange gifts and gather together with family and friends. Most importantly, we celebrate the birth of our Savior when “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Take a minute to consider the consequence of that verse. The Word, a member of the trinity, became human. Jesus came down from Heaven to live with us on Earth. Jesus gave up both the awesomeness of heaven and his position with the Father to be an instrument in the plan for our redemption. With God, there are no coincidences or accidents. God’s “Christmas Plan” was well-orchestrated and executed with precision. A plan that ultimately takes our Savior to the cross and demonstrates the incredible love of our God. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

We often enter the Christmas season with a plan and good intentions to lift Jesus up and make Him the central point. I don’t know about you, but it’s easy for my “Christmas Plan” to become cluttered and scattered. While those activities mentioned in the opening are all good, if we are not careful, they will take over, and we will miss out on the gift God gave us. Reflect on your journey to salvation. Think about that day when you said “Yes” to God’s way and accepted Jesus into your life. That was the moment when you understood what God did for you, realized what it meant and felt like to be redeemed, and caught a glimpse of his amazing love.

Let us not have this Christmas pass us by without taking proper time to truly adore Him. Use this Christmas to reconnect to that moment when you were born again. Use this Christmas to give Him the honor and praise that He deserves.

Mary Did You Know

Jim Brummett

One of my favorite Christmas songs is entitled "Mary Did You Know". Written by Mark Lowry, the lyrics bring to mind a picture of heavenly angels hovering over and surrounding the virgin Mary. Imagine, as she proudly gazes down upon the face of her new born baby boy, the angelic chorus quietly begins to serenade her with this prophetic Messianic song:

Mary did you know that your baby boy
will one day walk on water?

Mary did you know that your baby boy
will save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you

Mary did you know that your baby boy
will give sight to a blind man?

Mary did you know that your baby boy
will calm a storm with his hand?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God

Mary did you know the blind will see, the deaf will hear and the
dead will live again

The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary did you know that your baby boy
will one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding is the great I am

Mary Did You Know - Cont.

Mary could not possibly have fully comprehended the miracle God had just bestowed upon her at the moment of her son's birth. These words would have begun to open her eyes to the incomparable life that she had just brought into the world. A life that had been sent to earth through her womb to provide salvation to a lost world.

She had delivered her deliverer and could literally kiss the face of God, the perfect Lamb, the Great I Am

Today, these words serve as a timely reminder of the miracle of the incarnation.

As this Christmas season arrives and the holiday stresses begin to mount, meditate on these beautiful lyrics and allow the Prince of Peace to calm your day and refocus your heart and mind on the true meaning of Christmas.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Christmas Works on So Many Levels

Matt Cook

There's an old joke that asks, "What's the best thing about elevator jokes?" The answer, of course, is that they work on so many levels. The Christmas story also works on every level!

The 100 mile view - from a spaceship: The Christmas story, as a whole, is about the fulfillment of God's promises to redeem His people, and through them, the entire world. The view from this level looks like 1 John 4:9 - "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."

The 10,000 foot view - from an airplane: This is the Christmas story we tell to our children. It may not dig into deep theology, but it conveys the key points: Jesus was God, born to Mary in a stable, worshipped by angels, shepherds and wise men, etc. This is a beautiful story of God's gift of Jesus, and worthy of the attention and celebration we give it at Christmas time each year.

The sea level view - from the ground: This is the nitty gritty "real life" version - the adult version, if you will. At this level, you explore the inter-personal realities of a virgin birth, the extreme poverty of the shepherds, the evil murders by King Herod, etc. There is additional truth to be learned from perceiving the story at this level, and recognizing the historical reality of the story.

The digging deeper view - through a microscope: This is where you dig into the theology and deeper truths. This is struggling with how Jesus could be fully God and fully man. Struggling with belief in the factual reality of the miracles described. Struggling with the necessity and sufficiency of Jesus's incarnation and sacrifice. Philippians 2:6-7, among others, dives to this level.

The point is, you can't go wrong digging into the Bible this Christmas. You can explore at any level you want. There is not a right or wrong option - there is not a hierarchy of value. Open your mind and heart to God's Word this Christmas, on every level.

Buy One, Get TWO Free!!

Randy Unruh

"For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." Romans 5:19

So you may not know this about me, but I am a shopper. I love to shop and God blessed me with 3 daughters to shop with me so I don't look like a lonely old man when I'm walking around the mall.

I am always looking for those great deals, and when the holidays come, those "buy one get one free" deals or those 50% off deals are awesome.

Yet in all these good deals, there is one deal that continues to stand out. A deal that has stood out for nearly 2,000 years, and a deal that doesn't require rain-checks or even getting up at 4 in the morning. If we were to give this deal a similar title, I'm sure it would read something like, "By One, Billions Free!"

This deal, of course, is salvation through Christ. Freedom from Satan's power, freedom from eternal punishment, and as a bonus, a personal relationship with God Himself. In essence, it is the only deal that lets you start over and be something even better... And the best part is, it's already been paid for! This amazing, life changing deal was paid for by God Himself, who came down to die so that you would not have to [spiritually].

And all this deal requires is you "claiming that deal." Like going to the store and buying something that's on sale, you see the ad. All you then have to do is go get it. God's offer of a relationship is there for you to claim. All you have to do is realize that without God you have nothing, and without God you cannot be freed from your sins. Once you realize this, all you have to do is ask God to forgive you, and change your life because you know that Jesus has already paid for your sins.

Celebrating a Christ-centered Christmas

Nancy Parker Brummett

How can we make this a Christ-centered Christmas? The activities we choose to do and the traditions we choose to keep will all help. But what will really keep us balanced, and centered on Him, is our faith and understanding that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). We are centered on Him when we can thank Him for the past, focus on Him in the present, and trust Him with the future.

First, thank Him for the past. Think back over all the Christmas mornings you've experienced in your life and praise Him. Even if you've had some disappointing Christmases, Jesus was there. Thank Him that He will heal any wounds. In fact, to stay centered we must acknowledge that as part of the Triune God, Jesus was not only present in our past, He was present before the beginning of time. Then He came to earth to show us God in the flesh, to die for our sins, and to live again!

Next we have to acknowledge who He is in the present. Who is He in your life this Christmas, and in mine? We are in touch with who He is in our lives when we keep our thoughts on Him. Philippians 2:5 KJV says Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. We need to take all our thoughts captive in this way. To keep Him, and His work on earth, in mind even as we shop and give to others.

We also stay centered on Christ, at Christmas or any other time, when we begin to grasp who He will be in the future and learn to trust Him with our future. In the Book of Revelation we see glimpses of Jesus reigning in heaven in all His glory. We learn that he is coming again—coming back for us! In Revelation 22:12 he says, “Behold, I am coming soon! . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the Beginning and the End.”

This Christmas, thank Him for the past, focus on Him in the present, trust Him with the future, and you will be blessed with a very Christ-centered Christmas.

“And they will call him Emmanuel”—which means “God with us.”
-Matt. 1:23

Peace on Earth Lindsey Longrie

Although Christmas music has been playing regularly in our house, the song that's been trapped in my head is not one of the common Christmas songs. My oldest son has been singing or humming "I've Got Peace Like a River" lately and as a result, everyone else in my house is singing it, too, over and over and over! I can't help but think about the lyrics...

"I've got peace like a river...

I've got love like an ocean...

I've got joy like a fountain in my soul."

And maybe it's a fitting song for Christmas after all. When we find ourselves rushing throughout the year, how much more it can be at Christmas time! As you juggle events and activities, maybe you feel like you are in a rushing river just trying to stay afloat, instead of the calm flowing river of peace. When you encounter trouble and trials throughout the season, your soul may not feel as though it is bursting like a fountain of joy. But that first Christmas the angels brought "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Luke 2:10) Jesus was bringing peace to us, if only we could believe and accept it. Jesus loved us so much that He came down from the Heavens that first Christmas so that we could know Him and that we might live full of peace, love and joy, "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Eph 3:18) Instead of letting the season of Christmas time drain your soul of peace, love and joy, let Jesus fill it. If we put our focus on the person of Christmas, put our trust in Jesus, our souls will be full!

It's what Christmas was about from the beginning and Jesus still wants to fill our souls with peace, love and joy today. But he doesn't just want us to keep it inside. Paul encourages us in Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." May your soul be so full this year that peace, love and joy pour from you onto those around you. May they wonder where it comes from and want to find it too. And may we join with the angels praising God as they sing "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill to men." (Luke 2:14)

Prince of Peace Darren Melugin

Yes, the whole "Prince of Peace" thing at Christmas.

I will probably, always remain perplexed and amazed with the story of the 1914 Christmas Eve during World War I. According to History.com, the German and British troops were in a trench fight with a small space of land between them called "no man's land". Apparently, the miracle began on Christmas Eve when the soldiers from both sides began singing Christmas carols. The singing lasted through the night. On Christmas morning, a few soldiers from both sides emerged from their trenches and walked into the "no man's land" area. They shared cigarettes and pudding from their rations with each other. From the journals of some of the soldiers, historians believe some of them may have played a soccer game with a "make shift soccer ball". Obviously not a real one. Other soldiers spent the time of the "miracle truce" to gather their comrades who had been killed and buried them.

I am amazed at this event because it reveals something about humanity in a general sense. The soldiers opted for peace when the opportunity was given. And the opportunity came in the form of a date on the calendar. Christmas can have that effect, right? It is not very tough for us to see how a truce like this could happen, it was Christmas.

In the Holy Scriptures there is a passage from Isaiah that gives us insight to the peace we humans gravitate toward.

Read Isaiah 9:1-6.

In verse 6 a phrase we know very well is, "Prince of Peace". This verse is a prophecy of Jesus' Kingdom that will someday become a reality here on earth. We long for the day when peace will be on the earth, but until then we get some glimpses of that incredible peace. It comes in the Christmas season. Jesus is the Peace we crave. As His followers we are commissioned to show this peace wherever we are and all through the year.

Merry Christmas

What is Christmas All About?

Brian Fitzpatrick

In an effort not to date myself, some of us can remember a television special which was first shown on December 9, 1965, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, featuring the Peanuts characters of Charles Schulz. This was a time when families would gather around to watch those Christmas Classics because if you missed the program, you would have to wait until next year to see it. How did we live through those difficult times? There was no Netflix, DVRing the show to watch later or pulling it up on YouTube. The message of this Christmas Special which was produced over 50 years ago was the over-commercialization of Christmas (something that we all struggle with). During the Christmas play, Charlie Brown out of frustration, yells, "I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about! Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" His friend, Linus, calmly states, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about!" He takes center stage and eloquently recites verbatim, Luke, Chapter 2, verses 8-14. There is no mention of Christmas decorations and trees, presents, Santa Claus or the multitude of Christmas plays, parties and events that invariably will be a part of our December. Instead, it is a strong statement about shepherds abiding in the fields, an angel of the Lord appearing, a reminder not to be afraid, the news of a Savior, who is Christ the Lord and was born today in the city of David and all this would be a sign to us about Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace and good will to men. As we all prepare for the remembrance of Christ's birth and partake in our family traditions which are an important part of our memories, let us all take the simple message from those few lines delivered by Linus on what Christmas is all about.

Our Christmas Tree: A Story of Love and Hope

Sandi Leaf

One of my favorite activities at Christmastime is decorating our family Christmas Tree. Every year, it's like a trip down memory lane as we place each ornament on the tree. There are hand-crafted ornaments from our kids and dear friends; ornaments from special places we've visited; and most importantly, special ornaments that remind us of the true meaning of Christmas.

The heart of our Christmas decorations is the Christmas tree. The evergreen tree majestically points to heaven, and unlike other trees, its needles stay green all year. This tree represents hope for the future and is symbolic of God's gift of eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ. "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son" (1 John 5:11).

The top of our tree is adorned with either a Christmas angel, reminding us of the good news of our Savior's birth (Luke 1:10-14); or a bright star, representing the Bethlehem Star which guided the magi to the Christ child where they bowed down to worship Him and brought their gifts to honor Him (Matthew 2:1-12). Like the angel atop the tree, we also use Christmas bells, trumpets, and horns to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Jesus told us "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows Me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Strands of Christmas lights encircling our tree represent the hope of the world, Christ's light shining through us. "...I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47). The lights bring a sense of warmth and security in a dark world.

Our Christmas Tree: A Story of Love and Hope - Cont

The red ornamental balls, ribbons, and holly berries symbolize the blood Jesus shed for us on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins (1 John 2:1-2). He paid the price once for all, a demonstration of the depth of God's love: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

One of the kids' favorite Christmas tree decorations are the candy canes. This (usually) red and white striped treat comes in the shape of a shepherd's crook. It reminds us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and "the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). The Good Shepherd uses his crook to bring the lost lambs back into the fold. The red stripe represents the blood of Christ's sacrifice and the white stripe stands for His purity.

And finally, the presents under our tree reminds us of the many gifts that God continually bestows on us and the abundance of His love. It also serves to remind us that our true treasures are in heaven and not on this earth: "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:20-21). They also remind us to give sacrificially to others.

So, this year, as you admire your Christmas tree, remember the immortality of the resurrected Christ; and through Christ, the hope we have for everlasting life. Let your life be the light to lead someone to experience Christ's love this Christmas.

The Tastes and Smells of Christmas

Rick Samz

As I was reading through the Christmas story in Luke, I was thinking about the things that would remind Mary of this joyous event. I was wondering if there were things in the manger that would have a lasting imprint in Mary's memory. Did the hay and shepherds have a unique smell? Did Mary eat something that would always remind her of the evening of Jesus' birth? As the child Jesus grew, did recollection of these smells or tastes bring back fond memories to Mary? Did these memories cause her to relive the joy and excitement of Jesus' birth?

As I was meditating on the Christmas story, I pondered the taste and smells that remind me of Christmas. My mom was a very good candy and cookie maker. Our family didn't have a lot of money so to make Christmas special she made numerous types of candy and cookies. I still remember coming home from school to a house filled with the aroma of Christmas treats. Although Mom spent weeks making these sweets we were not allowed to eat any of them until Christmas Day. My favorite candy was a brown sugar variation of fudge called penuche. It contains peanuts that add a salty taste to the super sweet bite. The cooking penuche produced an awesome aroma of browning butter and caramelized sugar. The only time penuche was made in our house was for Christmas. Over the past few years I have tried to make this candy during the Christmas season. It never turns out like my mom's, but the smell and taste of penuche still bring back fond memories of Christmas at home. Christmas time was always a joyous family time as we celebrated the birth of our Savior.

My prayer for the parents and grandparents who are reading this is that you will create tastes and smells that will remind your children and grandchildren of the birth of their Savior. My hope is that as your loved ones recall the joy, peace and love of Christmas they will draw ever closer to our Lord and Savior.

Which Jesus are You Seeking? Cyndy Sherwood

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” Luke 2:6-7 (NIV)

So many of us are fighting battles this time of year. Battles against time, “Will I get it all done?” Battles against health, “How bad will it get?” Battles against loved ones, “Can we still make this work?” Battles against grief, “Will I find even an ounce of joy this season?”

In response, we seek the Jesus of Ephesians 1:19 (NIV): “... and His incomparably great power for us who believe,” because we want our circumstances to change. And, of course, we should seek that Jesus, because he is our warrior, the one who fights for us.

Sometimes, though, the most powerful thing we can do to settle our mind, to settle our anxious heart, to settle our soul, is to seek the baby. To remember that during a time of dark oppression, a time when God’s people were suffering under the punishing rule of the Romans, God sent a Savior.

It wasn’t the kind of Savior they were looking for. What good is a baby? But that baby represents the hope for all people, for all eternity. That baby is God’s voice speaking, telling us, “I’ve got it under control, right now, today, and every day still to come.”

Whatever battles you are fighting this advent season, please take time to go to the stable and gaze on the simplicity and perfection of God’s Son, Jesus. Find respite and peace in knowing God holds you and your battles. Make a little time to rest in Jesus.

Human Response to Heavenly News

Kailyn Johnston

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby in clothes and lying in a manger”. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about”. Luke 2:8-15

I love this moment in scripture. My feeble mind can hardly wrap around the glory displayed. The image of Angels bursting forth in song and bringing long awaited and glorious news to shepherds is nothing short of spectacular. There are 2 pieces of this scene that strike me. First, I find it so interesting that the Angels never told the shepherds to go celebrate the baby. The Angels never said go find the child. They merely told them the facts. The action of the Shepherds going to find baby Jesus and celebrate his birth was a human response to Heavenly news. This news was so breath-taking, so exciting and so life-changing that the shepherds immediately got up to go discover the child for themselves. Hope ruptured through Israel due to the birth of the Messiah. How could someone not go celebrate?

Second, the angels said “for all people”. How often do we approach good news and great joy that is for all people? In our world today, we lack this unity. Rather, we face division. We face shootings. We face racial tension and segregation. We face people feeling unsafe in America due to the color of their skin or their cultural background. We face unsafe homes and broken families. We face pain. We face so much pain.

Human Response to Heavenly News - Cont.

God has a purpose and a place for all of us in His redemptive plan. Our human fragility is no exception. God uses His people to restore His people. God works, lives and breathes through each of our actions. So during the Christmas season, a season trademarked with joy, generosity and tenderness, I have to wonder, if Jesus were here on Earth today, how would He celebrate Christmas? Where He would be? Who would He spend time with? How would He give to others?

This Christmas, let's find our response. Let's pray for the martyrs in the Middle East. Let's lift those affected by war, poverty, addictions, and neglect. Let's take personal responsibility for the segregation haunting our communities. Let's pour into our neighbors. I pray that our Christmas wish this year will be for something more than peace on earth because praying over an abstract thought often lacks personal action. I pray our Christmas wish will be for our eyes to be opened to what our human response is to the Heavenly Good News for all people.

Six Words for the Christmas Season

Susie Cook

I recently read a little story told about the author Ernest Hemingway. Whether true or not, it triggered something in me something that made me pause and think. Briefly, Hemingway was once challenged by fellow authors to write a story using only six words. A story in six words? Impossible! Yet, what he came up with was concise and heart-wrenching, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Only six words, but together they create a powerful narrative.

I wonder if we could come up with just six words to encapsulate our purpose, our story for this Christmas season. How would our Christmastime look different if we were to intentionally change our objective with six small words? Something other than 'Please, can it be January now?' or 'Still shopping for the perfect gift.' How about 'So tired, must eat more cookies.' Even something beyond Christmas: not the same without you. What if, instead, our season could be shaped by the words 'Baby Jesus. All I really need?' Imagine if we made 'Today I'll show Christ to others' our six-word-story for each day in December! Psalms 96:3a gives us the perfect six words upon which our lives can be centered, "Declare His glory among the nations". In the same way, Revelation 14:7a gives us another succinct objective, "Fear God and give Him glory". This Christmas season, I ask you to have a conversation with God and ask Him what He would like your six-word story to be. Ask Him who He wants you to be this year. Ask Him what story He wants to define you. Impart the Good News to all.

Take Time to Ponder

Karen Else

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”
Luke 2:16-19

After the birth of each of my sons, I spent hours holding them in my arms and looking at their tiny faces, just pondering what each of their futures would hold. As I read the Bible passage in Luke, I was deeply touched by the thought of Mary treasuring up all of the memories of the events that had taken place leading up to the birth of her son, Jesus. Mary pondered the words of the angel, Gabriel. He told her that she had found favor with God, and was going to give birth to His Son! Mary thought about the appearance of the angel of Lord in her husband's dream telling Joseph to take Mary as his wife, because what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit.

Mary remembered when the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy the moment Elizabeth heard Mary's voice! Finally, Mary thought about the shepherds who had been told by an angel to go to the town of David to see the baby who would be the Savior of the world. Mary would give birth to a son who would save people from their sins!

Mary spent time weighing, treasuring and revolving all of these events in her mind. Even though Mary probably did not fully understand the significance of each event, she put her trust in God and had faith He would give her the courage, guidance and direction she would need to raise His only Son who would be the Savior of the world.

Prayer: I pray that each of us will take time to ponder the miracle of the birth of Jesus Christ. Lord, help us to remember that we can trust You and accept Jesus Christ as our Savior.

The Greatest Gift—Ever!

Willie Shelton

Every year, Linda and I asked our children to write Christmas wish lists. These lists were—and are—intended to prioritize their wishes and hopefully put some realism in their gift desires. But over the years there was always one gift on our daughter's list which seemed to mock our objectives: she wanted a pony. As she was growing up, we explained many times that we couldn't get her a pony: no place to keep it, too much work to keep it up, too expensive, etc., etc. Yet, the request for a pony showed up every year. It's now a good family joke, and even in her adult years, her list concludes with "...and a pony."

Each Christmas we celebrate God providing the greatest gift mankind has ever known. Unlike our daughter's pony wish, it's free, it doesn't require a special place to keep it, and it doesn't take extra work on our part. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He GAVE His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." And how do we earn this gift? We only have to believe in Him! It's a gift that was so difficult for the Father—allowing his Son to die for our sins—yet so easy to receive for us. I find it hard to fully comprehend eternal life in heaven with the God of the Universe, but that is exactly what He has promised us as believers in His Son.

The Greatest Gift—Ever! - Cont.

As parents, we love our children with an unconditional love that begins with their births and lasts until our deaths. Our God loves us with an unconditional love that is eternal—the Bible says He knew us even before we were born! And He loves us so completely that despite our sinful nature, He wants an intimate, minute-by-minute relationship with us. God has given me—and our daughter—so much more than a pony. He has given us the privilege of communicating with Him, being loved by Him, and being blessed daily by Him. And we got this huge gift just by believing Jesus Christ is who He said He was!

Thank you, God, for allowing Jesus to come to earth, to die for my sins, and to rise victorious over death to reign with you forever! Thank you for Christmas when we can laugh about the pony and we can rejoice in the knowledge that we are yours forever!

The Day After Christmas

Jenna Fariss

The morning of December 26, 2012, my husband, Mike and I filed into the dark ultrasound room still on a high from such an amazing Christmas celebration the day before. We held hands and smiled happily at the thought of getting to see a 3-D image of our 24 week old baby boy. We got to see our tiny son wiggle and move around in my tummy. It was a standard scan and our normally chatty ultrasound tech was quiet. As usual, she said she would be right back with the Doctor and left the room. Mike needed to rush to work and since we thought it was a routine ultrasound, he left also. There I was, laying alone in a dark room, naïve to what was about to happen. The Doctor appeared a few minutes later. I noticed a look of panic on his face when he saw Mike was no longer in the room with me. That was when I developed a knot in my stomach.

He started talking. It was all so fuzzy. He explained something about an obstruction and damage to our baby's kidneys and that he would need surgery right after he was born. I do not really remember much of that day. I drove to work and stared blankly at my computer. My head was spinning not knowing how I was going to hold myself together enough to tell Mike when we both got home that night.

Four and a half years later, we have an incredible, thriving son. I used to dread December 26th with the memories of that hard day. Now I look back with great delight because God showed up that day in a strong way for our family. And He has continually blessed us more than we could have ever imagined.

The Day After Christmas - Cont.

Sometimes I wonder, how did Mary feel when God sent the angel to Galilee to inform her that she would become pregnant with a son? And not just any son, the Son of God. After all, she was a virgin looking forward to marrying Joseph. When the angel, Gabriel gave her the news, she was alone and probably extremely confused. She was also going to have to tell Joseph. Can you even imagine having that conversation with your soon-to-be-husband?! But, God showed up in tremendous ways. He gave Mary the strength to carry Jesus. God showed up for Joseph when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid and that Mary was going to give birth to Jesus as described in Matthew 1:20.

Sometimes life is overwhelming for us all in so many ways. This Christmas season is such an incredible reminder that no matter what you are going through that God is going to show up for you and to "be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you." -Deuteronomy 31:6

The Yellow Stop Light

Elizabeth Walker

Based on: Luke 1: 1-25

When I was a little girl in Sunday School, I remember learning about God's different answers to prayer. The teacher used a paper stop light as an object lesson prop. "What does the green stop light represent?" she would ask. "Green means God says yes to your prayers," we would answer excitedly. "Alright, what does the red stop light represent?", she would ask next. That was easy too, "red means God says no to your prayers," we would answer. Then she may explain that sometimes, we ask for things that are not good for us such as a room full of candy or to be able to bring home every toy in the toy store. "Ok, then what does the yellow stop light represent?" Hmm... that was a little harder. It's not yield like in driving. It's not hurry up and speed through like some people think... "The yellow stop light represents when God says wait," she would say. Why would God say wait? Why wouldn't he just say yes or no? That was a tough one for a young child to understand. It is a tough one to understand today. Why would God say wait when we have not asked for the equivalent to a room full of candy or every toy in the toy store?

Today's passage from Luke tells the story about John the Baptist's conception. John the Baptist is known as the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were the parents of John the Baptist. Zechariah was a priest in the temple of Jerusalem. He was in the lineage of Aaron, who was a brother of Moses. His wife was a daughter of a priest also in the lineage of Aaron. They were very religious people according to verse 6. They were blameless, and they observed the Lord's commands. They were also childless, according to verse 7, because Elizabeth was unable to conceive. This would have meant in their culture, that their family line would end. This would have been a shameful situation for them. We can tell that they had prayed for a child, in verse 13, the angel mentions this fact. So, God had told them to wait. They had received a "yellow light" from God. Why? Why wouldn't God choose to bless them? In verse 18, Zechariah mentions that he, "is an old man and his wife is well along in years."

The Yellow Stop Light - Cont.

We do not know exactly how old Elizabeth was. But, we do know that she would have been past her child bearing years. You have to wonder when they had given up on their idea of having a child? When did they stop asking? But in their old age, God surprised them with a yes. They finally had a "green light."

We do not know why God chose to have Zechariah and Elizabeth wait for all those years for a baby. We can surmise that it was not because of some monumental sin in their life. We know that God's Word had said that they were blameless. We do know that God's timeline is not the same as ours. We also know that waiting produces character- Romans 5:3, "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Maybe God was developing the fruit of patience in them, Romans 12:12- "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." We just do not know God's reasoning. But we do know the outcome. We know that Zechariah and Elizabeth brought forth a child that would tell people about the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. A child who would grow up to baptize the Son of God. God had a plan all along for this elderly couple!

What have we given up asking God about? Maybe God has not given a "red light" but a "yellow light" and we have not realized it yet! How do we know? There are many verses in the Bible that talk about continuing to ask God about a situation. One verse that comes to mind is 1Thessalonians 5:17-18, "Pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." What are you asking God for? What have you given up on? Is it a wayward child, an impossible financial situation or maybe a baby that just won't sleep through the night! Give your request to God, and keep seeking him. Maybe he will give you a "green light" after all. Look for what God is teaching you through the process.

Psalms 27:14- "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."

Unclutter Your Mind For Christmas!

Harlan Else

I pride myself on being able to multi-task. In fact, even though I am not a juggler, I can simultaneously keep a lot of “balls” in the air. For me, life is pretty boring when I don’t have a whole bunch of things to think about. The problem with all of this is that with all the thoughts going on in my head at once, I sometimes find it difficult to focus on a single thought or task.

I believe that is what happens to many of us during the time leading up to Christmas. “Where are we going or are we staying home for Christmas Eve, or Christmas Day?” “What should I buy my kids, my spouse, or my brothers and sisters for Christmas and how am I going to pay for it?” “What am I going to do about my sister-in-law with whom I had an argument last Christmas that has not been resolved?” “And as my family celebrates holiday traditions, how am I going to emotionally deal with the recent death of my spouse or one of my parents?”

These questions and many more clutter our minds during the holidays and cause us to lose our focus on the birth of the Messiah. Let’s all resolve to unclutter our minds this holiday season by remembering the words of the Psalmist, “Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10. Following this advice will enhance the abundant opportunities for renewal when we focus on the birth of Jesus. And it may even soften your heart toward your sister-in-law.

Christmas Through New Eyes

Stephen Houlihan

A year and a half ago Rachael and I started our journey to become foster parents. In that year, it has made us look at many situations through new lenses. This is our first Christmas with our kiddos, and they have so many good questions about what their "Favorite Holiday" is truly about.

In their past, they have been used to holidays away from their family. The uncertainty of where they will be on Christmas Day and how it will look being in another family's home. This year, they have a new outlook on what Christmas is about. It is no longer about what presents they get but why we celebrate Christmas. Luke 2 paints the best picture of what Christmas represents: the birth of Jesus, our savior coming to Earth to save us all.

It paints a picture for us of what Christmas should be about. While it is always great to see family and eat a nice Christmas dinner, there are children out there that don't get to see their family. That isn't an easy thing to imagine in such a wonderful time of year, but sadly, it happens more often than you think. This is the whole reason Jesus came to earth. He came to save us all from our hurt and our sin. Little kids who have been through such pain can celebrate Jesus coming to save them because they are seeking a best friend who will never leave them, and THAT is who Jesus is. So, in this season while we are in the midst of family and friends, say a prayer for those who are broken and hurting and know that Jesus is right there with them.

Surprises

Stewart McWilliams

Now I find it hard to believe, though I know it's true, that some people don't like surprises. But I'm not one of those people! I absolutely love them, and I like giving surprises as much, or more, than I like receiving them. But it is so hard for me to keep the surprise a secret. Probably the hardest Christmas surprise I had to keep happened many years ago when our children, Kami and Kaleb, were in early grade school. Kristi's parents, Mammaw and Papa, were coming for Christmas and we decided to keep it a secret from the kids. Now in the McWilliams' house, as I'm sure is true in many others, grandparents reign supreme in the eyes of the youngins. I will never forget Christmas Eve Day. We were going about the normal madness that surrounds the home of a pastor on the biggest church day of the year when my phone rang. Finally, it was Mammaw calling to tell me they were a few blocks away and asking me to put the kids on the phone. She proceeded to talk to them about how sad it was that they weren't going to get to come, right up until the kids answered the door bell to discover one of their best Christmas surprises - Mammaw and Papa! That was a good Christmas.

Now that I think about it, Christmas is good every year because of the surprise of Jesus. Not just in the fact He came but in the nature of His coming. Matthew 1:23 says "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). What's most surprising about this verse is not the "virgin birth." It's "God with us." Think about that, God has become one of us. He did that not simply, so we would be able to better relate with Him, but so He would be able to better relate with us. This relationship grants us access to the presence of God.

(Hebrews 4:14-16)

Surly that's a surprise everyone can enjoy!